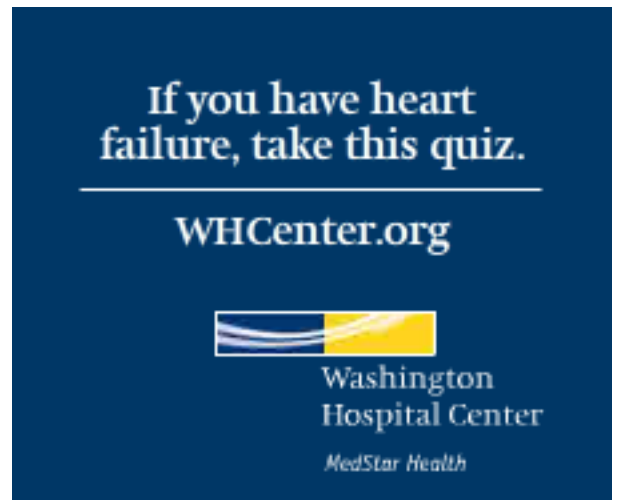


## How Fairfax can get school discipline right

It is openly conceded that the student discipline process within the Fairfax County Public Schools needs an overhaul. Last week, District Superintendent Jack D. Dale [presented several proposals for reform](#). His plan includes speeding up the process, [recording hearings](#), providing better support during suspensions, giving more options to school principals, developing better data collection and analysis, and reinforcing staff training. If implemented fully, these steps would be a good start.

But we at FairfaxZeroToleranceReform.org have identified six crucial areas where these proposals and current policies and practices still fall short. Further changes are needed to address these issues:

1. Our students are systematically denied their constitutional due process rights. Discipline hearings, which the Supreme Court requires to be “[fundamentally fair](#),” are in fact anything but. Indeed, a recent Freedom of Information Act request from our group revealed that the hearings office has not exonerated a single student in 5,025 cases over the past six years. Guilt is predetermined and built into the process. “Violators” should be innocent till proven guilty. Recording hearings is a good idea, but discipline investigations must be fundamentally restructured based on principles of fairness and objectivity.
2. Accusations of misconduct are often made based on imperfect or erroneous testimony, and [trivial offenses are commonly met with severe punishments](#). Because of this, students accused of misconduct that could result in suspension or expulsion should be given Miranda-style warnings, and parents should be notified before their children are questioned by administrators. This last change would go a long way toward engaging parents as collaborators instead of adversaries. Also, because of instances in which minors have been coerced into signing falsely implicating statements, students should not be asked to sign any statement except in the presence of a parent or guardian.
3. As has been widely reported in recent months, compulsory transfer to a new school is a common form of discipline in Fairfax. These transfers often are an emotionally and psychologically devastating experience for students, and they can have, as [we have regrettably witnessed](#), potentially tragic consequences. This practice must cease.
4. It is incontestable that a wildly disproportionate number of long-term suspensions, expulsions and attendant disciplinary actions fall on minorities and special education students in Fairfax. While we make no



accusations of deliberate prejudice, this is nevertheless an issue that requires scrupulous attention and the guidance of experts in the field.

5. Disciplinary actions must be developmentally appropriate and commensurate with infractions. Students are at times given to harmless mischief, and any accusation of misconduct should consider the totality of the circumstances. Educators frequently ignore the fact that the brain's prefrontal cortex, responsible for mature judgment, does not fully develop until young people reach their early 20s. We urge Fairfax to develop a highly tiered approach to discipline.

6. The emotional and mental health of students must be centrally considered. Parents, schools and peers are fundamental educational, social and emotional supports that can prevent youths from succumbing to depression, suicide and academic failure. More than 25 percent of Fairfax youth report clinical signs of depression, 14 percent report suicide ideation and more than 75 percent report sleep deprivation, according [to Fairfax County's 2009 youth survey](#). Fairfax has a moral responsibility to stop practices that contribute to this.

We fully appreciate the need to maintain order within schools, and we do not oppose appropriate discipline. We want safe schools for all our children. What we do oppose is the culture of punishment and the unconscionable excesses and abuses that pervade the Fairfax discipline system. We must transform this system into one that is restorative, educational, just and child-cherishing.

**Caroline Hemenway and Janet Otersen, Fairfax**

The writers are co-founders of [FairfaxZeroToleranceReform.org](#).

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